

STAT

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
8 May 1984

Salvador death squads, a CIA connection?

By Dennis Volman

Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

© 1984 The Christian Science Publishing Society, all rights reserved

San Salvador

The United States Central Intelligence Agency and US military advisers have helped organize and have financed, trained, and advised special Salvadorean Army and intelligence units which, although presumably set up for counter-intelligence purposes, subsequently have engaged in "death squad" activities.

These units, in the course of their counter-intelligence activities, frequently torture and sometimes kill Salvadorean citizens — apparently with the knowledge of their US mentors.

These charges are made by two well-informed sources, closely connected with the upper reaches of the Salvadorean political and military power structure. Circumstantial evidence backing up their charges comes from sworn testimony given to the leading human rights group in El Salvador, the legal protection division (Tutela

Legal) of the Roman Catholic Archbishop's office.

In Washington, according to well-placed congressional sources, the US Senate's Select Committee on Intelligence is currently opening an investigation of Salvadorean death squads. Some senators on the committee have raised questions about possible CIA connections with the death squads.

One of the Monitor's two main sources for the charges about a US connection with death squad activities is a politically conservative, very prominent Salvadorean civilian, widely respected for his moral probity. The other is a Salvadorean of high military rank with strong links to Salvadorean intelligence circles.

Both sources discussed the charges at length with this correspondent and made additional allegations about the involvement of senior Salvadorean officials in death squad activities. They refused to allow their names to be published for fear of retribution. The two sources have no direct links with each other but, for different reasons, both say the bulk of their direct knowledge of the situation ended in December 1983. However, they believe the situation has not substantially changed since then.

The civilian source has knowledge of death squad activities in three ways: through a high-ranking civilian professional working in the Salvadorean Army general staff headquarters, where many of the acts reportedly have taken place; through close friendship with some of the victims, some of whom were tortured and released and others tortured to death; through his close contacts with high-level Salvadorean military officials. He is morally outraged that such activities, and what he sees as the US connections with them, are taking place and says he believes it essential that they be made public knowledge.

"How absurd you Americans are," this civilian source remarked bitterly. "With the one hand you send your vice-president here to control the death squads, and with the other you participate in them."

His reference to the US vice-president was to George Bush's visit to El Salvador in December last year in which Mr. Bush pressed the Salvadorean authorities to put an end to death squad activities and remove officers allegedly involved in them.

Last year, there were more than 5,000 unsolved murders, abductions, and disappearances in El Salvador, according to the archbishop office's Tutela Legal. Most of these acts are attributed to rightist death squads and their allies in the Salvadorean military and security forces. After the Bush visit, the figures declined in January and February; but they went back up in March, although they remained significantly lower than before the vice-president's visit.

The Monitor's military source is closely connected with El Salvador's military-security structure. A man of strong conservative views, he says that his overriding motive for speaking out is a deep concern about a possible communist takeover if there are not major changes in the country's political-military structure. He is convinced that these changes cannot occur without an end to the killing and corruption, and to what he too is convinced are US links with death squad-type activities.

This latter opinion is also reflected among some prominent US congressional staffers who say that little progress can be made in bringing about reforms in Central America until CIA policies in the region are curbed and the CIA's political influence within the Reagan administration and Central America is diminished.

According to both of the Salvadorean sources, the Salvadorean group most directly linked with the CIA is the National Intelligence Agency (ANI). This is an operations-oriented counter-intelligence group originally set up under CIA direction about four years ago, and still financed and advised by the CIA.

As part of its function, the two sources say, ANI keeps watch over, detains, interrogates, generally tortures, almost always beats, and sometimes kills suspects that it believes have links with leftist organizations. ANI is under the command of Col. Rinaldo Goelcher and Col. Gabriel Contreras who, according to the military source, are in close and regular contact with the CIA station chief at the American Embassy.

ANI headquarters, says the military source, are located three blocks from the entrance of Colonia San Francisco, an upper-class residential neighborhood in the capital city of San Salvador. A visit to the area shows a high-walled building under military guard. ANI also has military intelligence branches in the provinces of San Vicente and La Unión, adds the military source.

Most of the killings, both Monitor sources say, result from the tortures used in attempts to extract intelligence information. People die during torture, they say, or are killed because the torturer leaves marks on the bodies which he realizes could be used to prove what was done to the victims.